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### WRITTEN BY:

Deborah Taylor and Jessamy  
Garver-Affeldt

### REVIEWED BY:

Issa Elh Allah Tanko, Aurélia  
Donnard, Roberto Forin, Vanessa  
Leigh, Julia Litzkow

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# “Fixing” people in place through policy and development? Efficacy and unintended consequences of migration deterrence in Kantché

## Executive summary

Migration studies focusing on Niger are very often framed from the perspective of EU externalization of borders and the consequent effects of these deterrent measures on transit migration. It can therefore be easy to overlook the impact of migration policies and responses in Niger on the country’s own migrants. However, migration has been a longstanding tradition and means of livelihood diversification for Nigeriens themselves, and local migration dynamics and government responses also interact with each other in important ways. This paper serves as a reminder of that fact, and of the resilience of migration as a way of life even in the face of various efforts to curb it.

On 30 October 2013, the bodies of 92 people, including 32 women and 48 children, were found in the northern Nigerien desert, about ten kilometers from the border with Algeria. The majority of these migrants had come from the Department of Kantché in Niger's southern Zinder region, and their vehicles had broken down, leaving them stranded for days. Their deaths made headlines in Niger and beyond, and grabbed the attention of the Nigerien government, which expressed its desire to counter the phenomenon seen in Kantché of substantial migration of women and children to Algeria.

This tragedy marked a turning point in the Government of Niger's approach to migration, which became increasingly restrictive, and not only due to external pressure from European donors. This was demonstrated through responses such as forums against irregular migration in Kantché at which the government encouraged local actors to take a stand against the practice, as well as the signature of a bilateral agreement which allowed for the return of Nigerien citizens irregularly present in Algeria. It was also seen in the passage and enforcement of Niger's Law 2015-36 which criminalized the smuggling of migrants, and effectively made previously normal elements of mobility in Niger illegal. Following the tragedy in the desert in 2013, there was also increased attention paid by development actors to Kantché, and a shift towards development projects incorporating migration management elements.

This briefing paper explores the efficacy of these measures and the consequences – at times unintended – they have had on migration from Kantché. Overall, these measures were not judged as being particularly effective in overcoming the prevailing migratory pressures. To the extent that migration from Kantché has declined, external factors such as insecurity in destination countries were seen as playing an important role. Restrictive measures on the part of the Government of Niger made movement more difficult, and were considered as having contributed to some extent to decreased departures, but people also shifted their routes and destinations in response, and key informants emphasized that desire to migrate persists.

Recent development projects were deemed insufficient to replace potential gains from migration, and their emphasis on returned migrants was seen by some as leading to greater migration, as community members felt they had to migrate before they could be eligible for development assistance. At the end of the day, circular migration is a phenomenon which is deeply rooted in this Department, an area in which a combination of demographic pressure and scarcity of arable land make traditional agricultural livelihoods insufficient. To the extent that development projects privilege solving the “problem” of migration over the creation of sustainable alternatives, they are fundamentally out of step with local history, culture and circumstances.

# Introduction

**“Migration is a cultural phenomenon, before being circumstantial. Should it be prevented or controlled? Several networks of actors, identified or not, participate in migration processes. Therefore, a practice anchored in the way of life of populations cannot be easily erased.”**

**Dr. Arifa Moussa Ado Salifou, University of Zinder**

Migration studies focusing on Niger on the part of international scholars and analysts are frequently framed from the perspective of EU externalization of borders and the consequent effects of these deterrent measures on transit migration. It can therefore be easy to overlook the effects of migration policies and responses in Niger on the country's own migrants, and the role of the Nigerien government in these responses. However, migration has been a longstanding tradition and means of livelihood diversification for Nigeriens themselves, and it is also important to consider how Nigerien migrants and their communities are impacted by the migration policies playing out in their country.

In the Department of Kantché in Niger's south-central Zinder region, this well-established migratory practice has evolved to include a large number of women and children, drawing attention and responses from Nigerien authorities, both national and local, as well as NGOs and international organizations. Responses to this particular phenomenon have included both deterrent approaches and the use of development as a means to try and “fix” people in place in their communities of origin. In a context where migration has become a way of life, it is useful to consider whether these approaches have been effective in meeting Nigerien government objectives of curbing migration, and what unintended consequences have arisen.

It is also a good moment to examine how development projects with migration management objectives have been viewed in the places in which they are implemented. New programming under the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa has just drawn to a close. However, its “development to tackle root causes of migration” approach

has been institutionalized in the new EU development budget (2021-2027). Ten percent of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument has been earmarked to this objective.<sup>1</sup>

This briefing paper is based on preliminary research for what was intended to be a deep-dive case study into community dynamics around migration in the Department of Kantché, and how they had been affected by policy and development responses to the substantial out-migration of women and children, which has come to be known as the “Kantché phenomenon.” Eleven key informants provided written inputs to a series of questions posed in June 2020. The key informants had closely observed and/or participated in responses to the Kantché phenomenon, and included three national NGO staff, two local elected leaders and two representatives of government ministries, all working in the Department of Kantché, as well as four academics from the University of Zinder. Unfortunately, concerns about conducting field research and face to face interviews in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the project had to be curtailed at the stage of the literature review and initial key informant inputs, and so interviews with returned migrants<sup>2</sup> and community members were not ultimately possible.<sup>3</sup>

This paper serves as a reminder of the importance of national and local imperatives related to migration, even in a context with substantial external pressure and intervention. Nigerien government policies and responses to migration have their own history and logic and were not created from thin air at the time of the so-called European migration “crisis” in 2015. Both restrictive measures and development incentives to deter migration were seen in response to the Kantché phenomenon from 2013 onwards. At the same time, no matter who is wielding the “sticks” or offering the “carrots” to keep people in place, migration drivers are shaped by historical, cultural and environmental factors which are not easily overcome. This briefing paper examines these issues by charting the history of the Kantché phenomenon and evolving policy and rhetoric related to migration on the part of the Nigerien government, and looks in particular at how development approaches to the issue have been perceived at the local level.

1 Claes J. & Hambleton T. (2020) [Migration and Development in the New EU Budget](#) Clingendael Institute; Chadwick V. (2020) [EU breaks impasse on aid budget](#) Devex.

2 The MMC uses the term 'refugees and migrants' when referring to all those in mixed migration flows, unless referring to a particular group of people with a defined status within these flows. As this study is focused on a specific migration phenomenon affecting an area of Niger that is not known as a refugee sending location, and which is not generally considered to be a situation of mixed flows, we use the term 'migrant'.

3 The project was not intended to provide an in-depth survey of recent development projects, and due to the limited scope of the exercise there remain issues – such as the establishment of migration observatories – which were not engaged with.

## Migration as a way of life and the “Kantché phenomenon”

Migration has been a coping mechanism and complement to agricultural activity in Niger dating back to the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup> An already established practice in other regions of Niger, greater numbers of peasant farmers from the Zinder region of south-central Niger began to practice seasonal migration at the time of the great drought of 1968-1973. The drought profoundly changed agricultural conditions throughout Niger and led to the collapse of peanut production, previously a crucial livelihood in Zinder. Thus, after the rainy season, farmers would leave their villages for urban areas in Niger and northern Nigeria to find casual employment, sending home remittances to pay for food and other necessities.<sup>5</sup> It was also around this period of large-scale drought and food crises that women from Kantché, located in the western corner of the Region of Zinder, began to migrate north to the mining town of Arlit, Niger, to seek domestic work.<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon of female migration evolved and developed over the course of the seventies, and from the time of the second Sahelian drought of 1983-84, there was an established pattern of circular migration to Algeria, though this remained relatively limited in scale.<sup>7</sup>

Challenging environmental conditions in the region have been exacerbated by demographic pressures. The population of the Department of Kantché has quadrupled in 40 years from 114,610 in 1977 to 494,970 in 2017. The average density in 1977 was 51 people/km<sup>2</sup>, compared with 213 people/km<sup>2</sup> in 2017; this is the highest in Niger. These population densities have not been supported by available natural resources, putting great pressure on arable land. Over-farming has led to declining yields, and the Department has been subject to chronic food insecurity. The early years of the 21st century were characterized by four food crises in Niger, occurring in 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2012. During this period increasing departures of women accompanied by children were seen across the department.<sup>8</sup> From 2010 onwards, the escalating violence of the Boko Haram conflict in northern Nigeria – previously an important migration destination for men in Kantché – also contributed to the geographic and demographic shift towards increased female migration to Algeria. The prevalence of women

and children in migration to Algeria - known as the Kantché phenomenon - is additionally explained by the importance of begging as a means of income generation, as these groups are considered more likely than men to successfully generate alms.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, men have often not been able to support the needs of their families or have abandoned them altogether, leaving women to fill the gap. Women are also responsible for the expense of furnishing their household, and there is socio-cultural pressure to do so fittingly. Such factors go hand and hand with the example of returned migrants who appear to have generated resources far beyond what is typically possible in Kantché.<sup>10</sup> Women have migrated mainly to ensure their survival in a difficult socio-economic and environmental context, motivated by the will to overcome poverty. However, they have additionally been able to make investments in their communities even beyond supporting food security at the household level, and migration is also seen as a path to empowerment and autonomy.

## Niger's recent migration responses: rhetoric and policy

### Tragedy in the desert and preventing migration

This pattern of migration of women from Kantché to Algeria continued without drawing any particular attention until the tragedy of 30 October 2013, when 92 people, including seven men, 32 women and 48 children were found dead in the desert north of Arlit, about 10 km from the Algerian border.<sup>11</sup> Two vehicles used to transport the migrants had broken down, and the migrants had waited at their vehicles for a week before setting out in different directions to look for help. Of the 113 people in the group who set out from Arlit for Algeria in late September, only 21 people survived. One of the survivors explained that the harvest in Kantché was mediocre and they were heading to Algeria in the hope that they would be able to find money to send home to feed their families.<sup>12</sup> The majority of these migrants were thought to have come from Kantché, and it was one of the deadliest disasters recorded on the migration routes of Niger since May 2001 when 140 migrants from Niger died of thirst in the Libyan desert.<sup>13</sup>

4 Painter, T.M. (1985) *Peasant Migrations and Rural Transformations in Niger*. State University of New York at Binghamton.

5 Rain, D. (1999) *Eaters of the Dry Season – Circular Labor Migration in the West African Sahel*. Westview

6 Souley, K. (2016) *La migration féminine vers l'Algérie : cas de trois villages témoins (Tsaouni, Eldawa et Fisguine) de la Commune Rurale de Tsaouni (Département de Kantché au Niger. Territoires, Sociétés et Environnement, Université de Zinder.*

7 Souley, K., Illou, M., Salé A. (2017) *Causes et conséquences de la migration des femmes de Kantché vers l'Algérie*. Revue du CAMES, Burkina Faso.

8 Malam Souley, B. (2016) *Les déterminants de la migration des femmes à Matameye. Actes du colloque sur les dynamiques migratoires en Afrique de l'Ouest : Histoire, flux et enjeux actuels*. Université d'Agadez.

9 Oumarou, H. (2016) *Des femmes et des enfants de Kantché sur la route de l'Algérie*. Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations.

10 Studio Kalangou (2017) [La migration des femmes et des enfants vers la Libye ou l'Algérie : Raisons, conséquences et mesures pour y remédier](#); Oumarou, H. op. cit.

11 Le Monde (2013) [Les cadavres de 92 migrants retrouvés dans le désert au Niger](#)

12 L'Observateur (2013) [Niger : 92 cadavres de migrants retrouvés dans le désert](#)

13 Ibid; BBC (2013) [Sahara deaths: Niger to close illegal migrant camps](#)

This tragedy marked a turning point in the approach of the Government of Niger to migration, which became increasingly restrictive from that time on. The Government, "deeply affected" by the disaster, declared a three-day national mourning period and in a statement read on the national news, announced that all actors involved in this migrant smuggling would be identified and "punished with the necessary rigor." It also stated that "this drama is the result of criminal activities piloted by networks of traffickers of all kinds." The government further ordered the immediate closure of the migrant safe houses for migrants bound for North Africa (known as "ghettos") in Agadez, the main transit town in northern Niger, and informed drivers of new "systematic checks" of vehicles going to Libya or Algeria.<sup>14</sup>

This push by the Government of Niger to counter irregular migration and to keep people in place in Kantché was not a one-off, but continued through rhetoric and concrete actions in subsequent years. In June 2014, it held its first "Government Forum on Irregular Migration in Kantché," at which the president and prime minister emphasized the need to stop the migration of women and children, which they viewed as a dangerous way of life. At the Forum, the Governor of Zinder stated:

**“ We will now take coercive measures to curb the phenomenon of irregular migration, prevent women and children by all means from crossing the borders of the countries of the North under the pretext of finding a better life. We intend to impose sanctions against these inhumane smugglers and intermediaries. ”**

He also recommended that local administrative and customary authorities and village chiefs undertake awareness campaigns in order to dissuade would-be migrants, warning them that arrangements were being made to block the route for migrants heading north.<sup>15</sup>

### Cooperation with Algeria on expulsions

The year 2014 also saw the institutionalization of cooperation with the Government of Algeria regarding

returns of undocumented Nigerien citizens. From 2014 through the end of 2018, it was estimated that more than 36,000 Nigerien citizens were forced out of Algeria.<sup>16</sup> While the president of the Algerian Red Crescent maintained in 2016 that these migrants were not being expelled, but had opted freely for voluntary return to their countries of origin, the Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of Migrants deemed this practice to be "forced return" of Nigerien nationals from Algeria to Niger.<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International pointed out that despite the somewhat more formalized and organized nature of the convoys which return expelled Nigeriens to Niger – as opposed to other nationalities who are left at the Algerian border to fend for themselves – these expulsions are nevertheless "conducted without any individual risk assessments or due process."<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon continues in substantial numbers through to the current day. For instance, in October 2020 alone, 3,880 Nigerien nationals were expelled from Algeria.<sup>19</sup>

Behind these expulsions is a readmission agreement concluded by the Bilateral Border Committee, which was set up in 1997 to strengthen cooperation between Algeria and Niger around border security and irregular migration.<sup>20</sup> At the time the agreement was being formalized, Nigerien justice minister Amadou Marou told the state radio: "The government has decided to repatriate all our citizens living illegally in Algeria and who are in camps....These Nigeriens in Algeria have lost all dignity and are dishonoring our country."<sup>21</sup> While the agreement itself was never made public, the Nigerien Minister of Interior made remarks in 2017 that alluded to a desire for expulsions to prevent irregular migration.<sup>22</sup> According to Amnesty International, he "stated that Algeria should have repatriated all women and children conducting begging activities in the country, 'responsible for promoting a negative image of Niger abroad.'" He said that this would have "discouraged" irregular migration to Algeria.<sup>23</sup>

With few exceptions, key informants did not view this policy of expulsions as actually having deterred migration to Algeria. According to an academic from the University of Zinder, "even those who are expelled from Algeria end up going back as soon as they can afford to."<sup>24</sup> Of the three key informants who felt that expulsions had served to discourage migration to Algeria, two indicated that

14 Le Monde (2013) [Le Niger ordonne la fermeture de camps de clandestins](#)

15 Niamey News (2014) [Zinder/Forum social sur la migration clandestine à Kantché : Enrayer le phénomène de migration clandestine et ses multiples dangers](#)

16 Amnesty International (2017) [Forcés à partir - Histoires de migrants victimes d'injustices en Algérie](#)

17 Actuniger (2016) [Algérie : les opérations d'expulsion de migrants subsahariens depuis le camp de Tamanrasset sont en cours](#); Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants (2019) [Visit to the Niger: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants](#) (A/HRC/41/38/Add.1)

18 Amnesty International, [op.cit.](#)

19 ECRE (2020) [New Spike in Mass Expulsion from Algeria to Niger](#)

20 DK News (2015) [Clôture du 5e Comité bilatéral frontalier algéro-nigérien](#)

21 Reuters (2014) [Niger says will repatriate its illegal migrants from Algeria](#)

22 Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, [op.cit.](#)

23 Amnesty International, [op.cit.](#)

24 Written inputs from academic at the University of Zinder, received 3 June 2020.

they believed that while fewer people were choosing Algeria as a destination, they were still opting to migrate, shifting their destination to Libya or elsewhere. This was echoed by another key informant who believed that “as far as Algeria is concerned, even today, in spite of the expulsions, the population continues the adventure towards this country,”<sup>25</sup> while also noting that expulsions from Algeria led potential candidates to some extent to “change direction and move to other economic centers.”

### **Law 2015-36: not just for transit migrants**

Another deterrent measure taken by the Government of Niger – the adoption and subsequent enforcement of Law 2015-36 – has generally been focused on by scholars and analysts as an externally facing policy that was instituted following pressure from European donors. At the same time however, the migrant deaths in the desert in October 2013 were seen as an influencing factor in the law’s passage.<sup>26</sup> The law was a logical continuation of rhetoric on the part of Nigerien government officials following this event, which was frequently punctuated with references to smugglers and traffickers, and the need to root them out and punish them (see page 5). Additionally, Nigerien authorities made sure that the law and its consequences were known to local authorities in Kantché.

Up to 2015, the transport of migrants throughout Niger was a common activity that was practiced openly, owing to Niger’s membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).<sup>27</sup> Nationals of countries belonging to ECOWAS entered Niger freely and made their way to Agadez by public transport. The logistics of onward transport from Agadez to Libya and Algeria in trucks and 4x4 vehicles with a driver and a guide had remained the same for decades. This changed dramatically when Niger became the first country in the region to pass a law specifically criminalizing the smuggling of migrants (Law 2015-36).<sup>28</sup> Pursuant to this law, all forms of commercial transactions linked to migration, including transport, were forbidden. Extended prison terms (up to 30 years) and heavy fines (up to 30 million CFA) could be imposed on those who did not comply. This law also required transporters to check the travel documents and ID cards of passengers, with failure to do so punishable by fines of up to three million CFA.<sup>29</sup>

The Law began to be applied vigorously from August 2016. At the same time, due to the perceived failure of the first Government Forum on Irregular Migration in 2014 to discourage migration from the Department of Kantché, a

second forum was held in Matamèye, the administrative capital of Kantché, on 29 September 2016, this time under the leadership of the Minister of the Interior. The forum publicized the measures of Law 2015-36 to punish the transport of migrants and highlighted the interceptions and arrests that had already occurred under the auspices of the law. Local actors were also encouraged to do their part in containing migration, as the Minister invited the 400 village chiefs in attendance to contribute to the effort by “denouncing the candidates for this adventure of irregular migration.” Participants spoke in turn to affirm their support for the government’s decision to suppress the momentum of irregular migration.<sup>30</sup>

As the transport of migrants had now been criminalized, the routes by which migrants travelled had to be changed to avoid Agadez and other towns in northern Niger where they would be easily visible. These routes were more discreet, but longer and riskier to travel. The transport of migrants was then taken over by experienced armed smugglers and traffickers, travelling at night to decrease the chances of detection.<sup>31</sup>

According to Tchernon Hamadou Boulama, Program Director at the civil society organization Alternative Espaces Citoyens in Niger:

**“In the Department of Kantché in the Zinder Region, Nigerien citizens are more or less victims of internment in their own country due to this externalization which obliges the Government to prevent travel to Agadez, gateway to the North. To travel, migrants from this Department, mostly women and children going to Algeria, must play cat and mouse with the security forces.”<sup>32</sup>**

This sentiment was echoed by a key informant who spoke of how at public forums on migration organized by his organization, “people mostly talk about the evils of this law that prevents them from migrating.”<sup>33</sup> While several key informants spoke of restrictive measures on the part of the government disrupting migration and/or reducing departures towards the Maghreb, almost all who mentioned this also added that “bypass routes” or “new corridors” have sprung up to try and circumvent such measures.

25 Written inputs from academic at the University of Zinder, received 12 June 2020.

26 Molenaar, F. (2017) *Irregular Migration and Human Smuggling Networks in Niger*. Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of international Relations.

27 ECOWAS/979 [Protocol A/P.1/5/79 relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment](#).

28 Molenaar, F. [op. cit.](#)

29 Molenaar, F. [op. cit.](#)

30 Yacouba S. (2016) [Forum sur la migration clandestine à Matameye \(Niger\)](#) Conseil de la Communauté Marocaine à l'Étranger.

31 Tubiana et al. (2018) [Multilateral Damage : The impact of EU policies on central Saharan routes](#). Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

32 Secours Catholique (2019) [Externalisation - quand l'Europe sous-traite sa politique migratoire](#)

33 Written inputs from national NGO staff person, received 12 June 2020.

## Development as migration deterrence?

### Development drive pre-dating Valletta

While the policies described above provide disincentives to migration through expulsions and the criminalization and enforcement of previously acceptable modes of mobility, the Government of Niger and its development and humanitarian partners complemented these approaches with one intended to incentivize people to stay put in Kantché.<sup>34</sup> This carrot and stick approach was alluded to by the President of Niger, H.E. Issoufou Mahamadou in his remarks at the Valletta Summit on Migration, held in November 2015.

“As a contribution to the fight against irregular migration, Niger has strengthened its legal arsenal by adopting a law that punishes trafficking and smuggling of human beings. I also urged my government to develop and implement a sustainable development program for the prevention and fight against irregular migration. I am pleased to note that this program is in line with the axes of the action plan submitted for our approval.”

The Valletta Summit was held in response to the so-called European migration “crisis” of 2015. It marked the establishment of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa which was intended to “contribute to better migration management, including by addressing the root causes,” and which included development tools to do so.<sup>35</sup> The government of Niger and humanitarian and development partners had already been incorporating migration management objectives into aid projects in Kantché for several years prior to the Valletta Summit. However, it seems that the increase in international attention paid to Niger in this period did enable a further injection of development aid in the Zinder region, including through EUTF funds.

### More aid for greater migration management

Almost all key informants stated that they had noted an increase in the number of development projects in Kantché in recent years, which was primarily attributed to Kantché’s significant levels of migration, particularly of women and children. According to one key informant, the migration of women and children resulted in the Department becoming a favorite choice for the implementation of projects, although other Departments of Zinder Region were also high ‘sending areas’ for migrants, owing to low agricultural yields and extreme poverty. Another stated:

“Since the discovery of the migrants who died in the desert, among whom there are more from the locality, the state of Niger has shown its willingness to counteract female migration. Since then the number of NGOs working in the Department of Kantché has increased.”<sup>36</sup>

An IOM analysis of the Kantché phenomenon also identifies 2013 as the inflection point in terms of aid projects shifting from a more general humanitarian or development focus to encompass migration. This shift was marked – and the stage set for further such projects – by a project carried out through the Government of Niger’s High Authority for Peacebuilding (HACP).<sup>37</sup>

While a thorough review of recent projects and explicit analysis of their migration management objectives was beyond the scope of this research, key informants listed multiple projects taking place since 2013 which focused on returned migrants, or on women more broadly (presumably with an eye to their potential for migration). They frequently involved food-for-work, limited cash transfers, distributions of animals and other items, as well as small grants to women’s groups for revenue-generating activities. With a few exceptions, they were not designed to be long-term development projects, and it is significant to note that regardless of how these projects were conceived and framed by the implementing organizations, several key informants viewed them as primarily humanitarian in nature. This was encapsulated by a key informant as follows:

34 Cabinet du Premier Ministre (2016) [Bilan des 5 Ans de Mise en Œuvre du Programme de Renaissance](#) République du Niger.

35 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (accessed March 2021) [Our Mission](#)

36 Written inputs from academic at the University of Zinder, received 12 June 2020.

37 A government body hosted by the Niger President’s Office, the High Authority for Peacebuilding (HACP) developed projects in four of Kantché’s communes, identified as the most affected by migration to Algeria. The first phase of the project was primarily concerned with distribution of goats to returned female migrants, and a second phase gave female returnees small monetary grants to support income generation.

**“Most of the projects that intervened in recent years have had funding to mitigate migration compared to previous years where the idea was to contribute to community development in all sectors. In my opinion, the method of implementation of development activities does not largely promote the development of the department because the projects deal only with emergency issues while development requires a long-term vision.”<sup>38</sup>**

When asked if development projects in Kantché benefited the community broadly, one key informant stated, “almost all (development) projects are designed to fix migrants or potential migrants, so they focus on ex-migrants.”<sup>39</sup> This approach is exemplified by a project in 2014 which supported community groups in generating income, but explicitly stipulated that any group member who made the trip to Algeria would not be eligible for assistance upon return. According to the Departmental Director for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of Children stated: “From the implementation of this program to date, significant progress has been made with regard to women’s migration to Algeria, as conditions have been set to discourage women candidates.”<sup>40</sup> The “sedentary bias” implied by this approach assumes that people are better off if they can make a life where they started, precluding other potential benefits from migration, such as empowerment felt by female migrants. It also assumes a model of development that does not incorporate mobility, which seems to miss an important adaptive tool already used by the people of Kantché.<sup>41</sup>

### **(Perverse) consequences of focusing on returned migrants?**

Various key informants spoke of the emphasis projects placed on returned migrants, particularly women. It therefore seemed reasonable to hypothesize that projects’ disproportionate focus on returned migrants over the years may have generated bad feelings and impacted social cohesion at the local level. A few key informants did mention challenges, for instance “bad relations,” “frustrations” over the selection criteria or the “discriminatory character of projects” (ie privileging returned migrants). However, the consensus was that

relationships at the broader community level had not changed, nor had community solidarity been affected.

To the extent that tensions related to migration were observed, they tended to manifest at the inter-personal or inter-familial level, rather than in any sort of broad resentment towards returned migrants on the part of non-migrants. In a few cases, key informants spoke of husbands who were irritated by the support given to their wives, feeling that (as heads of households) they should have been the beneficiaries of aid. There were also mentions of social disruptions caused by the migratory process, for instance related to divorce, polyandry or adultery, misappropriation of property, betrayal of commitments, children being removed from school, ‘non-observant behavior of young people’ etc.

It is notable that while a focus on (returned) migrants was not seen as detrimental to wider community relationships, it was pointed to by more than a third of key informants as a push factor for others to migrate. Basically, migration and subsequent return were perceived as a “qualification” for receiving assistance. This conception was encapsulated by one key informant, who said: “Some activities have had perverse effects, such as support for migrants that was perceived by the populations as aid exclusively reserved for migrants. This has encouraged villagers to undertake migration, as only migrants are supported.”<sup>42</sup> As time went on, project implementers saw the value of including non-migrants. More recently, projects have included residents as well as returned migrants as target beneficiaries, an approach supported by key informants.

### **Project efficacy in question**

With few exceptions, key informants stated that these projects have not met the objective – either explicit or implicit – of providing an effective alternative to migration, and thereby encouraging people to stay in their communities. One stated, “frankly, overall, their activities are ineffective, as they have not deterred migrants from leaving.”<sup>43</sup> The various distributions and revenue-generating activities were considered insufficient for the needs of the beneficiaries, who felt that they could gain more by migrating. Several respondents also noted that aid from these projects was at times used by beneficiaries to finance further migration. Other respondents considered that to the extent that migration from Kantché has decreased, it is not due to projects implemented in the Department, but rather to insecurity

38 Written inputs from representative of a government ministry, received 30 May 2020.

39 Written inputs from national NGO staff person, received 12 June 2020.

40 Souleymane, L. (2019) [Migration des femmes et des enfants du département de Kantché : Combattre le mal par des activités génératrices de revenus](#) Nigerdiaspora.

41 Bakewell, O. (2007) [Keeping Them in Their Place: the ambivalent relationship between development and migration in Africa](#) International Migration Institute Working Paper.

42 Written inputs from academic at the University of Zinder, received 3 June 2020.

43 Ibid.

on the migratory routes, political unrest and civil war in Algeria and Libya and restrictive measures taken by the Governments of Algeria and Niger.

Feelings about the overall utility and efficacy of these projects were quite mixed. Multiple key informants expressed that while projects had conferred some benefits upon local communities, there were also significant flaws and failures. Many pointed to a failure to effectively involve communities in projects, and to account for the needs, realities, and opinions of community members. This appeared to be a factor even in the case of a project that had been appreciated by several key informants for having a relatively consultative and longer-term approach. One of the outputs of that project was construction of marketplaces. However, the project had no corresponding support for local production capacity that would help generate goods for people to sell in the marketplaces. As a Nigerien migration expert pointed out, this allowed traders from outside the area (notably Nigeria) to dominate the new markets. While it is positive that stall rentals contribute to municipal budgets, this hasn't helped support local livelihoods. One key informant summed up his feelings on recent development projects in the area as follows: "the population has benefited from the project interventions. But the important question is whether the projects have really taken into account the needs of the population. Some people think that they have not touched the root of the problem."<sup>44</sup>

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44 Written inputs from academic at the University of Zinder, received 12 June 2020.

# Conclusion

The Department of Kantché faces severe demographic pressure and insufficient arable land to support its population through traditional agricultural livelihoods. For this reason, over time migration has developed as a coping mechanism and complementary livelihood. While the extent of female migration has greatly increased in recent decades, and now also includes substantial numbers of children, there is also a historical precedent for women to migrate to northern Niger and into Algeria. These migratory movements are rooted in the need to provide in a context of chronic food insecurity and cultural pressures to make a home. While some view this practice as disruptive to traditional social norms, it has also increased autonomy and empowerment among women in the Department.

Since the October 2013 migrant deaths in the desert, the Government of Niger has made a number of efforts to deter irregular migration of its citizens and “fix” people in place. It has implemented a variety of responses which either target the Department of Kantché specifically, or which address wider dynamics associated with the Kantché phenomenon, such as the selection of Algeria as a destination. Examples of the former include holding two Government Forums on Irregular Migration in Kantché which encouraged local leaders to counter the practice, and a focusing of development activities in the Department. An example of the latter is the 2014 bilateral agreement between Niger and Algeria which has led to the expulsions of tens of thousands of Nigerien citizens from Algeria, although these expulsions were not considered very effective in discouraging migration. The government also made good on its anti-smuggling rhetoric in the wake of the tragedy in the desert with the promulgation and enforcement of Law 2015-36. While frequently cited for reducing transit migration through Niger, this Law also had an impact on Nigerien citizens from Kantché, making mobility more difficult and dangerous for them.

Despite the implementation of many development projects in Kantché with migration management elements in recent years, often targeting returned migrants specifically, almost all key informants felt that these interventions had not served to deter people from migrating. Several even felt that the projects had the opposite effect, and actually had served to encourage migration. This was due to community members feeling that they needed to migrate as a prerequisite to qualify for assistance, and/or because people used the micro-credit they received through these projects to finance their migratory journey.

Many key informants felt that these development projects did not adequately account for local realities, and therefore were not effective at promoting or achieving sustainable development outcomes, despite conferring some limited benefits. Overall, the limited, short term and individualized character of most of the interventions described by key informants does not seem well suited to address challenges related to high population density, low agricultural yields, limited access to land and lack of viable job opportunities. Without achieving more structural changes, the pressure to migrate remains. This is underscored by the fact that frequently key informants spoke of deterrent measures against migration simply serving to shift people's routes or destinations, and/or placing an emphasis on external factors such as unrest in destination countries when speaking of any observed decreases in migration.

Migration of women, and particularly children, is not universally seen as positive within the Department, but migration is nonetheless a longstanding coping mechanism in a difficult environment. As one key informant from civil society put it, “during our interventions, the populations evoke migration less as a source of problems, but rather as a palliative for poverty.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, to the extent that development projects privilege solving the “problem” of migration over the creation of sustainable alternatives, they are fundamentally out of step with local history, culture and circumstances.

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45 Written inputs from national NGO staff person, received 16 June 2020.



The MMC is a global network consisting of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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